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A LETTER

to the

INHABITANTS OF MANCHESTER,

on the

Exportation

of

COTTON TWIST.

Manchester,
Printed by R. and W. Dean, 9, Spring-gardens;
and
Sold by Messrs. Clarke, Market-place.

1800.

A LETTER

to the

INHABITANTS OF MANCHESTER,

&c.

My friends and fellow townsmen!

I TAKE the liberty to address you in consequence of a late publication directed to the inhabitants of this town and neighbourhood on the Exportation of Cotton-Twist, dated April the 14th. and signed "A MANCHESTER TRADESMAN," tending to give you erroneous notions respecting the consequences of the exportation of twist, to raise alarms and jealousies among you, and to induce you to join in addressing the legislature to lay a duty on, or entirely to prohibit the exportation of that part of our manufacture. If I could imagine that you were inclined to treat this important question with as little ceremony, and to judge as rashly and presumptuously as the "Manchester Tradesman" has done, without previous knowledge either of the general interests of the trade and commerce of this country, or the particular interests of the trade of this town, and without

any information of the nature and extent of similar manufactories abroad; or if I could believe that the public mind was more easily influenced by general and unqualified assertions, than by a fair statement of facts and a candid investigation of truth; or if I could presume for a moment, that your zeal for the interest of one set of men could so far outrun your reason and sense of justice, as to join them in oppressing another set of men, in order to enrich themselves; I should think it useless to trouble you with this letter. But I have a very different opinion of you. I know that you are able and willing to form a right judgment when the subject has been properly stated to you; and believing myself capable of giving that information, which some of you have not had an opportunity of acquiring, I should blame myself for withholding it at a time when it may be of important use.

The "Manchester Tradesman" asserts, "that the exportation of twist has for some time past, been secretly undermining our trade, and now threatens no less than its total annihilation." He farther asserts that "this practice must if persisted in, ruin three fourths of the inhabitants of this country, both rich and poor," and that "the exportation of twist is an injury to our trade that will naturally encrease every day." These assertions, my friends, ought to fill you (as it is intended they should) with anxiety and alarm, if they were true, or if they were supported by any proof or reasonable evidence. But you will in vain seek for these in the address in question. It does

not contain a shadow of proof or evidence to make good these assertions. This was, however, the first step which the "Manchester Tradesman" should have taken. He should first of all, have made it to appear, that the exportation of twist really is an evil, and that it is the cause of the depression, which several branches of the trade of this town have experienced. The only thing which looks like an attempt to prove this proposition, is the following passage: "We have never had a steady good trade since the exportation of twist began." I readily admit that these events (the depression of our trade and the exportation of twist) have been concomitant; but a little consideration will convince you, that they have had no connection with one another.—It is a known fact, that none of the lower numbers of water-twist have been exported, and yet it so happens, that the part of our manufacture for which this quality of twist is required has been in a more depressed state than other branches. The muslin and calico trades on the contrary, have been in a rising and improving condition, although the major quantity of twist exported, has been of a quality and fineness proper for the manufacture of these articles, and has actually been applied abroad to these purposes. If it were true, therefore, that our trade has suffered a decrease in consequence of the exportation of twist, exactly the reverse of the above must have taken place. Our heavy articles would have been in great demand, and muslins and calicoes would have met with no sale.

But the depression of our trade is owing to very different causes, the effects of which are not confined to this town. All the manufactures of this kingdom have been affected by them, and some much more severely than ours. Birmingham and Sheffield stand foremost in the list of sufferers; and Leeds, Halifax, Norwich, and Exeter have shared in the calamity. Will it be pretended, that they have furnished their rivals abroad with the means of supplanting them? Surely not. These common distresses spring from the same source. Before the year 1792, almost all Europe, in a state of unparalleled prosperity, was open to the English. The affluence and luxury which reigned every where, furnished full employment to the productive labour of this, and, indeed, every other nation. But the years 1793 and 1794 presented a very different spectacle. From the highest pitch of prosperity our manufactures sunk to almost total inactivity, in spite of the cheapness of materials and labour, and the low rate of the exchange. These favourable circumstances continuing, our trade experienced in subsequent years a partial return of prosperity. But in the year 1798, the price of materials of almost every description rose to a surprizing height, and, together with the high exchange, enhanced the prices of our articles upwards of 30 per cent. Such an advance would at any time have diminished the consumption and the demand of our manufactures, but then produced a much greater effect in consequence of the impover-

ished state of the few remaining parts of Europe where our goods could be offered to sale. It is remarkable, however, that even under all these difficulties our trade has not been so much depressed as in the years 1793 and 1794, although in those years very little twist had been exported. But the very causes from which our trade has suffered so much of late, have proved propitious to the manufactures of our neighbours. The enormous expence and great danger attending the introduction of English goods into France, Spain, Italy, Flanders, Holland, some parts of Germany and Switzerland, together with the very high exchange, obliged these countries to dispense with some of our articles, and for others to have recourse to manufactures more within their reach, both with respect to price and facility of introduction, although inferior in quality to ours. These are the causes of the depression of our trade, and of the advancement of the manufactures of Germany, in which they were greatly assisted by the low state to which manufactures were reduced in France by its internal convulsions; and it was fortunate for this country, that we had an opportunity of employing part of our capital and industry in the supply of cotton-yarn, the advantage of which would have been lost to us, if the exportation of that commodity had been prohibited. If you imagine that the German manufacturers could not have supplied these goods unless we had furnished them with cotton-twist, and that then our own goods would have been purchased instead of theirs; your want of

knowledge of the nature and extent of their manufactures would lead you into a very great error. The cotton manufactures of Saxony, Westphalia, Suabia, and Switzerland, are of long standing, and considerable extent. Hence, and from the support of large capitals, great population, cheapness of labour, and the encouragement given by their respective governments, they derive stability and a capacity of being easily and greatly extended. As long as fourteen years ago, when we were threatened with a tax on the produce of our manufactories, your delegates stated these facts at the bar of the house of commons, and exhibited (as I am informed) specimens of the most difficult articles manufactured in Saxony. It is now upwards of sixteen years since I have had frequent opportunities of inspecting quiltings, dimities, muslinets, jennets, &c. manufactured at Chemnitz in Saxony and in the district called the Voightlande. Calicoes have been manufactured and printed there, at Augsburg, Zurich, Basil, Neufchatel, and several other places, at least as early as in England, and have always been admired for the brilliancy of their colours, and the neatness and elegance of the designs. Muslins have been made in the neighbourhood of Zurich, St. Gall, &c. long before we even attempted to manufacture this article. And it deserves particular notice, that till within these six or seven years they have purchased no twist from the English. They can spin their own twist, and actually do spin a great part of what they want.—I have heard it stated, that the want of capital, and of coals, would pre-

vent them from erecting cotton-mills. This is a great mistake. They have more than sufficient capital * for such undertakings; and though nature has denied them the means which she has given to us for creating power to move machinery, she has favoured them with streams and falls of water, which in point of expence are preferable to steam-engines; or if these were absolutely necessary, countries that have fuel so plentiful and cheap, as to enable them to work iron ore to advantage, cannot be at a loss for combustible materials to give motion to a steam-engine for a cotton-mill. They have besides every other requisite for the establishment and carrying on of cotton-factories—mechanics of every description, not inferior in skill to any other nation, and in point of patient accuracy superior, as I think, to many; and a great population, which supplies them with an abundance of hands at an easy rate. But it is superfluous to prove the practicability of a thing, which has actually been effected. There are at this moment several cotton-mills both in Germany and in France. I have not heard, that any extensive establishment of this kind has been made in Switzerland, but I am persuaded, from my local knowledge and observation, that such an undertaking is not only practicable, but

* The idea that the people abroad want capital for carrying on manufactories, is one of those absurdities, which become current in spite of facts, which we have an opportunity of observing every day. Nations that have immensely large sums vested in the English funds, for want of better employment, are in want of capital for carrying on manufactories!

particularly adapted to the country and to the genius of its inhabitants.

I hope that it will appear to you, by what I have stated, that the cotton business abroad cannot be materially hurt for any length of time by the want of a supply of twist from England. Indeed, I do not believe that any political measure can be devised to stop its progress. All that we can do, and all that we have to do, is to give full scope to the exercise of our powers and ingenuity, in order to maintain the superiority of our manufactures, which, in times of tranquility, will always ensure them a preference. But, if all our endeavours should fail, even despair, I think, would not make me so bold as the "Manchester Tradesman," who valiantly exclaims, "If foreigners are to have the principal branches of our trade, let them have the spinning too—if that be the only part of our trade left, it is not worth preserving." Some of your better friends, with hearts as warm, but with cooler heads, will enquire, which are the best means of preserving, as much as possible, a trade of so much importance as the spinning business, in which an immense capital is embarked, and which, on a moderate computation, employs 40,000 hands? The "Manchester Tradesman" wishes you to believe, that supplying foreigners with twist, instead of preventing their building factories, will be the surest means of hastening the undertaking." He, therefore, invites you to join in application to parliament, for the purpose of effecting a prohibition of, or at least a heavy tax on

the exportation of it; and it should seem that he wishes the penal laws, which were enacted with a view of favouring the woolen trade, should be the model for the protecting laws of the cotton trade. The limits of this letter will not allow me to state to you the reasons which convince me, that all prohibitions of the exportation of raw and manufactured goods are impolitic and hurtful to the general interests of a nation, and I must refer you to Doctor A. Smith's celebrated work, "An Enquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations," where you will meet with much information on this subject, and where you will find, that this eminent man decidedly disapproves of prohibitions of this nature.—But you will allow me to trespass a little on your time and patience, with a few remarks on the prohibition of the exportation of wool and woolen yarn, because, I believe, that no one would ever have thought of laying such a restraint on cotton-twist, if the penal laws in the woolen trade had not furnished a precedent, and because we are very apt, indeed too much so, to follow the footsteps of others, even in their errors, without examining into the propriety of their proceedings, satisfied with the notion, that we may do what others have done before us, particularly, if we expect to promote thereby our selfish views. The penalties formerly imposed for exporting sheep wool, woollen yarn, and white cloth, were severe in the extreme. Doctor Smith says, "Like the laws of Draco, these laws may be said to be all written in blood." Even the milder laws enacted in the

reign of William III. are still very severe, and connected with such difficulties and restrictions, as oppress and clogg the whole inland trade of wool. It is, however, very well known, that in spite of all this, much of this commodity is smuggled abroad, so that these oppressive measures only restrain the conscientious tradesman, while they confer the exclusive advantage of this trade upon the smuggler. If you are curious to see an abstract of these penal laws, you may be gratified by perusing the 8th. chap. book 4th. vol. 2d. of Dr. Smith's Enquiry. There you will also find what means have been made use of by the woollen-manufacturers, to induce the legislature to enact these laws; and as they bear some resemblance to the pretences made use of to justify similar restrictions with respect to cotton-twist, I cannot forbear transcribing the passage. "Our woollen manufacturers, in order to justify their demand of such extraordinary restrictions and regulations, confidently asserted, that English wool was of a peculiar quality, superior to that of any other country; that the wool of other countries could not, without some mixture of it, be wrought up into any tolerable manufacture; that fine cloth could not be made without it; that England, therefore, if the exportation of it could be totally prevented, could monopolize to herself almost the whole woollen trade of the world; and thus having no rivals could sell at what price she pleased, and in a short time acquire the most incredible degree of wealth by the most advantageous balance of trade. This doctrine, like most other

doctrines, which are confidently asserted by any considerable number of people, was, and still continues to be most implicitly believed, by a much greater number; by almost all those who are either unacquainted with the woollen trade, or who have not made particular enquiries. It is, however, so perfectly false, that English wool is in any respect necessary for the making of fine cloth, that it is altogether unfit for it. Fine cloth is made altogether of Spanish wool. English wool cannot even be so mixed with Spanish wool as to enter into the composition without spoiling and degrading, in some degree, the fabric of the cloth." Just so, those who have raised the present clamour, pretend that foreigners cannot manufacture our articles without English twist; just so do they pretend that a prohibition would greatly encrease our trade, or even give us the monopoly of it; and with just as much truth. After all, the event shews that these restrictions, so injurious to the growers of wool, have not produced the benefit to the manufacturers which their avarice seems to have expected from them.* In spite of all these prohibitions and restrictions, the manufacturers of Aix-

* I much doubt whether their real object was that which they pretended. It seems much more likely that they made use of these indirect means to get the monopoly of all the wool growing in this kingdom. In this they have succeeded, and thereby have been able constantly to keep this commodity much below its natural price. Time will shew whether those who wish to restrain the exportation of twist, are not influenced by the same motives. If they succeed in confining the spinner to one market, they will soon be able to dictate their own prices and terms.

la-Chapelle, Vervier, Montjoy, Louvier, Elbeuf, Sedan, Abbeville, &c. almost entirely supply the continent of Europe with fine cloth, while the consumption abroad of this part of the English manufacture is gradually diminishing. The same is nearly the case with coarse cloths, and particularly with stuffs, which are gradually giving way to the productions of the manufactories at Eisenach, &c. The decay of the Norwich and Exeter trades is notorious. From what has been said it may be fairly deduced, that such prohibitions and restrictions, though they are sure to do much injury to one class of the people, are very uncertain in their effects as to any national or general advantage to be derived from them.* As to the idea that the prohibition of the exportation of twist will prevent foreigners from becoming spinners, you will, after a few moments reflection, perceive the absurdity of it. Suppose a prohibition should take place, what would happen abroad? The spinner there would have no competitors; twist would rise to a high price; the profits on it would be very great, and the inducement to erect factories would be proportionably powerful. Can you well imagine a more favourable opportunity for such an undertaking and

* On the 21st. instant, Mr. Pitt declared in the house of commons, that he believed, that the manufacturers of this country do not wish for any protecting duties; that all they desire is a free intercourse with all the world; and he asked, whether any man can believe, that the exportation of *unmanufactured* wool from this country could be productive of any serious inconvenience?—Please to observe the contrast between the opinion of this great statesman, and the resolutions of the special meeting at the Bull's-head, and the sentiments of the "Manchester Tradesman."

greater prospects of success?—If a prohibition should take place, what would happen in England? One half of the spinners would be ruined. And can you expect, that in such circumstances men will be satisfied to starve in a country which has wilfully ruined them, while encouragement and success would attend them abroad? A duty on exportation would operate in nearly the same manner. If it be moderate, it will act as a bounty for erecting mills abroad, if it be heavy, it will amount to a prohibition.—Let those who can with unconcern look on the ruin of their neighbours, consider these consequences in which they themselves must ultimately be involved. Let them also bear in mind that "to hurt in any degree the interest of any one order of citizens, for no other purpose but to promote that of some other, is evidently contrary to that justice and equality of treatment which the sovereign owes to all the different orders of his subjects,"* and that to petition parliament for such a purpose is offering it an insult, by presuming it capable of committing so cruel an injustice, and becoming a party in this conspiracy against the property of their fellow-citizens.

In almost every other trade, when persons no longer find it their advantage to continue in it, they can relinquish it with little or no loss, and engage in more profitable pursuits. But if the spinning business should sink to the low state to which a prohibition of the exportation of twist, or even a tax, would infallibly reduce it, few people engaged in that trade would escape ruin. Their machinery and buildings

* Smith, vol. 2, p. 504.

would [illegible] little or nothing, and all the property engaged in them would be lost to them and to the nation. Thousands of poor wretches would become burdens to their parishes, or depend for their subsistence on the casual assistance of the charitable; or, compelled by necessity, support a miserable existence by the perpetration of crimes.

Thus have I endeavoured, and, I trust, not without some success, to convince you that the depression of our trade is not owing to the exportation of cotton-twist, but to causes which operate equally on other manufactures, I mean the natural consequences of the war, and the various effects and changes thereby produced. I hope I have convinced you, that a prohibition would not materially benefit the general trade of this town, though it would be attended with dreadful consequences to that numerous class of people, the spinners, and that it would infallibly transfer this valuable branch of our trade to our rivals. I shall conclude with telling you, what must at the first view strike every unprejudiced mind, that the most certain way to preserve a trade of so much importance as the spinning business, is to leave it free and unshackled, and thus to enable the English spinner to meet his competitors on fair ground.

I am, with respect, my friends and fellow townsmen,

Your sincere well-wisher,

MERCATOR.

Manchester, April 28th, 1800.

R. & W. Dean, Manchester.

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